

ED423552 1998-00-00 Multicultural Children's Literature in the Elementary Classroom. ERIC Digest.

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ERIC Identifier: ED423552

Publication Date: 1998-00-00

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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading English and Communication Bloomington IN.

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"When I was a child, the teacher read, 'Once upon a time, there were five Chinese

brothers and they all looked exactly alike'...Cautiously the pairs of eyes stole a quick glance back. I, the child, looked down to the floor... The teacher turned the book our way: bilious yellow skin, slanted slit eyes. Not only were the brothers look-alikes, but so were all the other characters!...Quickly again all eyes flashed back at me...I sank into my seat." (Aoki, 1981, p.382)

The vignette above reveals how a minority child felt growing up in the mid 1900s--a time when cultural and linguistic diversity was neither valued in American society nor adequately portrayed in children's literature, an important channel for transmitting societal values and beliefs. The situation, however, has undergone changes in the past twenty years. With the increasing number of linguistic and cultural minorities in the United States, the American society today looks very different than that of Aoki's childhood. These changes in demographic trends impact the education system. Not only do schools need to prepare all children to become competent citizens, but also to create an environment that fosters mutual understanding.

IMPORTANCE OF MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Jenkins and Austin (1987) suggest that cultural understanding can be reached in many ways, such as by making friends with people from different cultures, and by traveling to other countries. They also emphasize the value of good literature, for it can reflect many aspects of a culture--its values, beliefs, ways of life, and patterns of thinking. A piece of good literature can transcend time, space, and language, and help readers to "learn about an individual or a group of people whose stories take place in a specific historical and physical setting" (p. 6). In addition, exposure to quality multicultural literature also helps children appreciate the idiosyncrasies of other ethnic groups, eliminate cultural ethnocentrism, and develop multiple perspectives. Dowd (1992) also argues that "...from reading, hearing, and using culturally diverse materials, young people learn that beneath surface differences of color, culture or ethnicity, all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, self-worth, justice and kindness." (p. 220) Finally, quality literature about a particular ethnic group benefits cultural and linguistic minority children as well. From reading stories about their own culture, children have opportunities to see how others go through experiences similar to theirs, develop strategies to cope with issues in their life, and identify themselves with their inherited culture. It is, therefore, important that educators incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum and make it part of children's everyday life. The following sections will provide guidelines and resources for selecting multicultural literature in the elementary classroom.

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The following guidelines for material selection were developed by adopting recommendations from various language arts and multicultural educators: Beilke (1986), Harada (1995), Harris (1991), and Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Yang (1992). They recommend that multicultural literature contain:

- 1. Positive portrayals of characters with authentic and realistic behaviors, to avoid stereotypes of a particular cultural group.
- 2. Authentic illustrations to enhance the quality of the text, since illustrations can have a strong impact on children.
- 3. Pluralistic themes to foster belief in cultural diversity as a national asset as well as to reflect the changing nature of this country's population.
- 4. Contemporary as well as historical fiction that captures changing trends in the roles played by minority groups in America.
- 5. High literary quality, including strong plots and well-developed characterization.
- 6. Historical accuracy when appropriate.
- 7. Reflections of the cultural values of the characters.
- 8. Settings in the United States that help readers build an accurate conception of the culturally diverse nature of this country and the legacy of various minority groups.

The guidelines above are by no means an exhaustive list. They are meant to provide a starting point from which teachers can explore the many aspects of multicultural children's literature. In addition, teachers may wish to consult with colleagues, parents,

and the local ethnic community, drawing upon their specialized knowledge and unique perspectives.

RESOURCES FOR MATERIAL SELECTION

In addition to the guidelines for material selection, it is also imperative that teachers have access to resources for selecting a collection of materials. A useful resource often contains critical reviews, bibliographic information, and an abstract of each work. It may also provide guidelines for using a particular book, and suggest materials for further reading on issues and trends in multicultural literature. Some of these resources are general, covering a variety of cultural groups, while others may focus on a specific category, such as African-Americans. Used appropriately, they can help teachers locate the materials in a timely and cost-effective manner. In the following section are just a few resources which can aid the collection-building process.

SPECIALIZED SELECTION SOURCES:



1. Barrera, R. B., Thompson, V. D., & Dressman, M. (Eds.).(1997). "Kaleidoscope: A multicultural booklist for grade K-8"(2nd Ed.). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.



2. Helbig, A. & Perkins, A. (1994). "The land is our land: A guide to multicultural literature for children and young adults."Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.



3. Miller-Lachmann, L. (1992). "Our Family, our Friends, ourWorld : An annotated guide to significant multicultural booksfor children and teenagers." New Providence, NJ: R. R. Bowker.



4. Muse, D. (1997). "The new press guide to multiculturalresources for young readers." New York: New Press.

REVIEW JOURNALS:



1. The ALAN Review

- 2. Book Links
- 3. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books
- 4. Children's Literature in Education
- 5. Horn Book Guide to Children's and Young Adults' Books
- 6. Horn Book Magazine
- 7. Interracial Books for Children Bulletin
- 8. Kirkus Review
- 9. MultiCultural Review
- 10. School Library Journ can help teachers to develop their multicultural literature collection. In addition, human resources--librarians in local or school libraries, as well as professors in the field of education and library science--can be valuable resources in the collection-building process. Finally, materials from minority children's household, such as photo albums and books written in their inherited language, are also rich resources.

The United States has been a multicultural society since it was founded, and ethnic and linguistic minorities have contributed significantly to its development. Their contribution should be appreciated, regarded as an integral part of American culture, and authentically represented by the literature collections found in our school libraries and

classrooms. Multicultural literature opens a window through which readers may explore the richness of diversity in the American society.

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Aoki, E. M. (1980). "Are you Chinese? Are you Japanese? Or Are you a mixed-up kid?" Using Asian American children's literature." *Reading Teacher*, 34 (4), 382-385. [EJ 238 474]

Beilke, P. (1986). Selecting materials for and about Hispanic and East Asian children and young people. Hamden, CT: Library Professional Publications.

Dowd, F. S. (1992). "Evaluating children's books portraying Native American and Asian cultures." *Childhood Education*, 68 (4), 219-224. [EJ 450 537]

Harada, V. H. (1995). "Issues of ethnicity, authenticity, and quality in Asian-American picture books, 1983-93." *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, 8 (2), 135-149. [EJ 496 560]

Harris, V. J. (1991). "Multicultural curriculum: African American children's literature." *Young Children*, 46 (2), 37-44. [EJ 426 223]

Jenkins, E. C. & Austin, M. C. (1987). Literature for children about Asian and Asian Americans. New York: Greenwood Press.

Pang, V. O., Colvin, C., Tran, M., & Barba, R. H. (1992). "Beyond chopsticks and dragons: Selecting Asian-American literature for children." *The Reading Teacher*, 46 (3), 216-224. [EJ 452 692]

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No RR93002011.

Contributors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official views or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Title: Multicultural Children's Literature in the Elementary Classroom. ERIC Digest.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Target Audience: Practitioners, Teachers

Available From: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th Street, Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.

Descriptors: Childrens Literature, Classroom Environment, Elementary Education, Elementary School Curriculum, Multicultural Education, Reading Material Selection, Scholarly Journals

Identifiers: ERIC Digests, Multicultural Literature, Web Sites
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